Through the Flash

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You are safe. You are protected. Continue contributing to the efforts by living happily, says the soft voice of the drone bird hovering only a few feet from my window, as it has been for the last forever. Since I'm the new me, I don't even think about killing anybody. Still, I touch the knife under my pillow.

Outside, a blue sky sits on top of everything, and I try to think about it like this: Aren't we lucky to have our sky? Isn't it an eternal blue blessing? Even though seeing it makes me feel crushed a little because whoever's on the other side of time has no idea how tired we are of the same. I get up and I brush my teeth. It's the little things. Then I look in the mirror, and say, "You are supreme and infinite." I take my headscarf off and let my hair breathe. I spritz and moisturize and finger-comb. The little things. After I'm dressed, I snap on a gray fanny pack and put Mom's knife in it.

I jump out my window to a tree branch, then across to the Quan family's roof, and then onto Mrs. Nagel's roof. I slip in through her window, and her house smells like cinnamon and old people as usual and always. In her kitchen I boil the water for her tea. The kettle whistles. I make Mrs. Nagel 's favorite: elderflower and honey. I put the mug on her bedside and watch her sleeping uncomfortably. Her nose is stuffy, so she wheezes like an old truck.

"Hey, Mrs. Nagel," I say as gently as I can.

"Hey." She squirms in the bed a little, then opens her eyes. She sees me, and I like how she isn't terrified. She almost smiles even. "Thanks, Ama. I appreciate it," she says. I pick a box of tissues off the floor and give them to her.

"No problem, Mrs. Nagel. Have a good one. Remember, your existence is supreme."

"Uh-huh," Mrs. Nagel says. Then she blows her nose. I smile at Mrs. Nagel before I slip out her window and leap back home the way I came.

Inside, I pass by my little brother's room. He's awake in bed. I can tell by the sound of his breathing. His sheets have trains all over them.

"Hey, Ike," I say. That's short for Ikenna.
"Ama, please," Ike asks in his whiny voice. He wants me to end his day. He wants me to kill him. He didn't used to be like this. He was six when the Flash hit, so his body can't do all the things he wishes it could. He still has his small peanut head and cheeks you want to pinch. But I don't pinch; he hates his cheek pinchies now. That's another thing I have to think about as I'm being my new self. I am forever fourteen, and I can do more than anyone. I am blessed. But Ike's blessed in his own way. "Ama, goddamn it. Just do it for me, please," he says.

"Why? It's a great day outside," I joke. I've made that joke more times than—well, I've made it a lot of times.

"Do you hate me?" Ike asks. "You must truly hate me to deny me this." No matter how much he's crammed in his head, when I see him, I still see my kid brother. Ike's one of the ones who can't do it themselves; he's a softy.

"I love you," I say. Ike screams a bunch of bad words, but still I won't kill him because even the old me never did that. Not him. He doesn't leave his room much anymore. I let him be and go to the kitchen.

"Hello, Daddy," I say in a singing voice that sometimes makes him smile. My father is in his old-man slippers and his pajama pants. He is fidgeting, swaying, like always. He can't be still hardly ever. He's getting ready to cook something. Am I nervous around him? Yes. But I try not to be. Now that I'm the new me, I try to be appreciative. Appreciative and definitely not afraid. If I get afraid, then I get angry. If I get too angry, I might go back to being the old me and be just like Carl on Kennedy, who is a monster. A war god. A breaker of men and women and children.

"Morning, ginger root," he says. Then he turns to me, and he's holding the knife he uses to cut meat.

"Daddy," I say. Then he slashes at me with the butcher knife. I have enough time to think some real thoughts as his arm moves to my neck. I could open my pack, grab Mom's knife before Dad's

blade reaches me. But I don't. Instead, I think, When will this ever stop? He's quicker than most people. But I'm faster than everyone. Way faster. Much more lethal when I want to be. The old me would make him suffer greatly. Instead, I try to say Daddy again but can't—not with my gashed-up neck and all—so I bleed out watching him watch me die. Then I die.

I'm in a gym, still in my jersey. Sweaty and upset. I feel a strong hand on my head. My face is crammed into her stomach. I can smell her along with the pinewood and dust of the Ramapo Middle School gym. I can feel her. My mother rubs my neck. She says, "It's okay." Then pushes me off to the locker room where my team is waiting.

You are safe. You are protected. Continue contributing to the efforts by living happily. I wake up. I look around and try to decide if what I think just happened really did happen. I decide it did. I had a dream. I saw my mother in a dream. It's something new. New things never happen anymore. There are no dreams except the ones you had the morning of the Flash. I haven't had a dream in forever. And still, I saw my mother. She was really there with me. I want to see her again. I want to feel her again. I pull out my knife. Her knife. I stare at the blade, and I tell myself it's only this one time. It's only this one time and then never again. Then I drag the knife through my arm. I bleed and bleed. Then I go.

No dream. No mom. Regular.

You are safe. You are protected. Continue contributing to the efforts by living happily.

I wake up in the usual. Blue sky, in bed, knowing everything will be the same. But still, after my father killed me, I saw something I've never seen before. I dreamed a dream. That never happens. It wasn't there the next time, but still. I saw her. I jump out of bed.

"Ike!" I say, running up to his room.

"What?" he groans. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"I'm not going to kill you," I say. "But something happened."

He knows me as well as anybody. Everybody knows everyone very well. We've all been together in the Loop longer than any group of people ever. But Ike knows me best. He gets out of bed and sits cross-legged on the floor. That's how he sits when he's thinking for real. That's how he sits when he cares.

"What happened?" he asks. And now he sounds like the old Ike.

"I had a dream," I say.

"So?" "I mean I dreamed through the Flash. I didn't wake up, then take a nap and dream. I saw it before I came back. That's never happened before."

"Are you sure?" he asks. He grabs a little flip notepad with a purple pig on the cover and a crayon. "What did you see?" he says, and starts scribbling. Nothing he writes will last through the Flash—everything goes back to how it was the day the bomb dropped—but writing in it helps him think.

"Well," I say. "I saw Mom." Ike gets up, takes a breath, and then sits back down.

"Ama, tell me what you saw, exactly."

"I was with Mom. At Ramapo. I think it was just after the first game of the year. We'd lost, I guess. Even though in real life I think we won. All this was before; you probably can't remember. But she hugged me, and it made me feel better."

"I do remember," Ike says, like I hurt his feelings. "Is this an anomaly?" I ask, finally. Ike's crayon dances words down.

"Perhaps," he says. He bites his lip. I wish I could share the dream better for him. I know he'd give anything to see Mom that way.

"Ama," my father calls. And my hands move toward where my fanny pack would be, but I'm still in my sleep shorts. "Sweetie?" he says. He's in my room. He knows how good I am at hiding. How I might be anywhere. I don't want to die yet. I'll be the old me if I have to be.

"What do you wanna do?" I ask Ike while creeping toward the door and out of the room.

“We’ll definitely do something.” And that’s already the best because he hasn’t wanted to do anything in a long time. “Let me think a little.”

“Okay, I’m going to see Daddy,” I say to warn him it might get bad.

“It’s unlikely he’ll be aggressive,” Ike says without looking up from his notebook. “He’ ll want to apologize to you, I think.”

“Daddy,” I say. He’s standing in his shorts and a T-shirt and his flip-flops. He has a stack of pancakes and juice on a tray in his hands. He always makes pancakes, which are my favorite, or crepes or omelets the cycle after he kills me. No matter how used you are to getting a knife whipped through your neck or punched in the eye or in the chest over and over again, it hurts. It’s much better to end a cycle with the Flash, which doesn’t hurt at all. Plus, you never know for sure that the Flash is coming even though it always, always does. And wouldn’t that be a shame if your own father already had killed you the day the Loop broke and you actually would have had a tomorrow?

That’s how the Loop affects him. He’s basically a sad monster half the time. The other times he’s my daddy. I try to love him either way. After he kills me, when the cycle restarts, he feels guilty. You’d think he’d eventually feel so guilty that he’d stop doing it. One day he’|I be better, I hope. I know. The new me lets him do it most of the time. The old me made it a mission to end him way, way before the Horn came. But I’m the new me. And I’m trying to make him better. He wasn’t always like this. He only kills me because I remind him of Mommy. Sometimes he says her name while he does it. “Glory, Glory, Glory!” That’s the sound of him killing me most times. Mom killed herself with her knife. My knife now. If she’d waited two months, she would have been with us forever. There aren’t enough words for forever.

When he’s standing there holding pancakes and trying to be better, I love him. It’s not even that hard. “Thanks, Daddy,” I say as I walk toward the bed and Mom’s knife. I don’t tell him about the dream because I don’t know how it will make him act. If he’s having a good day, I like to leave it alone. He puts the tray on my bed.

“How are you feeling?” he asks. He knows I can cut him to

pieces.

"I feel infinite and excited and ready to do anything and everything," I say. I give him a hug.

"Great. I'm thinking maybe we watch the day end. Together. You know, on the wall."

"Def," I say. We don't talk about him cutting my neck open. He never apologizes with words, but he's always trying his best.

"Okay, Mama Ama," he says. Then he touches the tray again. To tease me, he genuflects before he leaves the room and walks back downstairs. When he's down there, he sits on the kitchen chair with the wobbly leg, and he starts to cry. I'm really good at telling where people are. I can almost see them just by paying attention to the sounds of a house. My senses are a blessing.

I take my tray of pancakes back to Ike's room. He's dressed in sneakers that light up when he steps and a blue T-shirt with a cloud that has a smiling face.

"I think this might be a legitimate anomaly, Ama," Ike says. "I want you to be sure, though; was it a dream sustained before you restarted the Loop, not something you thought of when you woke up?"

I look at Ike all dressed up. "Yes!" I say. I'm almost sure.

It didn't happen all at once. It was forever ago. I realized Ike was speaking like an adult. That was the first thing I noticed. That was the first thing that helped me put the days together. That's when I started keeping through the Flash. It's like realizing you're in a dream except no matter what you do you can't wake up. Daddy didn't start remembering through the Flash until much later. By the time I started to keep through the Flash, Ike was already smarter than everybody. That was the first anomaly, asymmetrical retention through Loop expiration, that he explained to all of us. Which meant, for reasons we still don't know, we each came to realize we were replaying the same thing over and over, and the realizing happened at different times for everyone. It was a pretty alarming thing. To see you're trapped in infinity and know that no one can explain exactly how or why.

We tried running, like maybe if we ran far enough we could escape.

There is no escape.

So, to ease the transition, we'd throw a party each time somebody kept through. Those were good times on the grid, the space we live in as designated by war-effort planning. The last one to keep through the Flash on Grid SV-2 was Mr. Tuia. We had a big party the day he came through. There was barbeque and music, and Ike danced, and the Poples danced, I danced, and Mrs. Nagel waved her arms from a lawn chair, which was like dancing for her, and my father laughed and laughed. Mr. Tuia mostly cried. It's very hard at first for some people. But then if you figure that you are infinite, you are supreme and therefore the master of all things, and it's silly to be sad about things like how much your hip is always going to hurt or how you're so old that the flu means life in a bed or how gone forever your mother is.

The second anomaly Ike and Robert, who was a marine biologist before the Flash, explained to us was how, individually, some of us were "developing and accruing attributes." Accumulating, they'd said. Some people were accumulating differently. Ike's brain was storing facts and stuff better than anybody's. Lopez on Hark Street was all right on the clarinet before, but now we're pretty sure he's the greatest musician to have ever lived. I got strong, fast, precise. I became the Knife Queen. We have a pretty interesting grid.

I don't know much about the other grids in our state block, because way before the Flash came, the soldier-police—the state-sponsored warcoordination authorities—took away everyone's cars. Their slogan—'For us to serve and protect, you must conserve and respect"—is emblazoned on posters in the school, on the windows of some people's homes. The Poples pretended they were proud when their son was shipped for service. The poster in their window shows the soldier-police slogan in big letters stamped below men with puffed-out chests proudly holding the flag and guns, their faces hidden by the black visors of their helmets. Back before the Flash ever came, a lot of people actually loved the SPs. They thought they were keeping us safe. People believe lies, believe anything when they are afraid. That's

another thing. Aren't we lucky that before the Flash all the soldier-police were deployed elsewhere?

Still, even if you bike as hard as you can in any direction, only stopping to drink water, even if you pee and drink at the same time, you can only get so far before the Flash takes you. Even if you train for years and years. I've tried, and if anybody should have been able to do it, it's me. I use my body better than anyone. I can jump Olympic. I can break grown men with my bare hands. When I have a knife, I'm basically the queen of the world. Or the old me was. Now I let everyone be their own royalty.

"I want to discuss this with Robert," Ike says.

Then the Horn comes. Three hundred and sixty-seven drone birds all over the area screaming together. It's like a bright light for your ears. It's the right sound for what it is. It means defenses have been breached and the world is gonna end today. It lasts for two minutes. One hundred and twenty seconds. I close my eyes and wait. Ike does the same. Then it stops. The Horn is the exit point for many. It comes, and they just can't take the sonic bleed. So they take whatever they have handy and jam it into their neck. But if you close your eyes and breathe, if you expect it and welcome it even, it's still terrible, but the kind of terrible you can take.

The quiet after the Horn is sweet and lush. It's something you don't want to let go of. But we have work to do. "Okay," I say after we appreciate a few moments of silence. "Let's go see Robert."

"I want to be inside before the rain," Ike says.

"Maybe we'll do that; maybe we won't. We're supreme and infinite," I say, reminding him that rain is a small thing for infinite beings.

"Yes, so I've heard, Ama. I'd still like to be inside before the rain," he says.

"I'll go grab the stuff."

"I'll be waiting." Ike pokes a fork into my pancakes.

I get ready in my room, then I jog downstairs and head

outside. Two houses down I see Xander strangling his dog on their green lawn. It weeps and yelps, and its tail flaps around like a helicopter blade until it stops.

“Hello, Xander,” I say with a big wave. Before, he had been a friend of my father’s, and like my father, he was too old to fight. There aren’t any men left from age twenty to forty-five.

“Hi there, Ama.”

“What did poor Andy do today?”

“What do you mean?” Xander says, then he goes back in his house.

I knock once on the Poples’ door. The big window where they keep their soldier-police poster gets smashed every morning, so the poster is facedown, hanging in the shrubs, dressed and stabbed with glass. It’s the first thing the Poples do most days. Smash that window that reminds them of how gone their son is. When the door doesn’t open fast enough, I kick it open. Mr. Pople is naked on his couch, drinking a glass of something. His skin is flappy and foldy.

“Hey, Mr. Pople.”

“Ama Knife Queen Adusei,” he says slowly, smiling and raising his glass and bowing his head.

“Just Ama,” I say. Not in a way that’s threatening, but just to remind him I don’t make people say that anymore and haven’t for a while.

“Ama,” he says very slowly. He looks into his cup, then drinks from it. His hands head down toward his waist.

“See ya, Mr. Pople,” I say as I run up the stairs. I go to his bedroom and grab the small piercer gun from a drawer. It’s the first gun I ever shot. It’s a small black thing with a smooth kick. It makes almost no sound when you pull the trigger. It kills in whispers, which I like. Or used to like. There’s an extra clip in the same drawer. I grab both.

“Hello, Ama,” says Mrs. Pople, who’s still in bed, a cover up over her head.

“Hi, Mrs. Pople, gotta go,” I say.

“Tell your brother to come see me soon.”

“He’s a little caught up today,” I say and I don’t mention that it’s been a very long time since she and Ike were life partners.

“I see. He prefers Jen. Still?” Jen was a teacher at the school. But I don’t know if Ike prefers anyone right now.

“You’d have to ask him, Mrs. Pople. But maybe your husband is interested? Or maybe Xander is. I think I heard him say he thought you were interesting and physically very attractive.”

“You’re a nice girl, Ama,” Mrs. Pople says.

“We’re all supreme and infinite. We might as well act like it,” I say as I zip my fanny pack closed. I really am settling well into becoming a better person, I think. I’ve really come a long way from what I was, and I was once a true terror. The kind that probably never existed ever before. But now here I am, being called “nice.”

Kennedy Street is down on the other side of the grid, so it takes a little while on the bike. Days are short. Soon it will rain, and Ike wants to be inside before the rain. “Bye, Mr. Pople,” I say without looking at him doing whatever he’s doing.

“Goodbye, my liege,” he says.

My bike is on the side of our house. I run back in to tell Ike I’m ready, then wait for him outside. I do my kicks and my punches and some tumbles to get loose. I jump some jacks. I give the maple in our yard two good punches and a roundhouse kick to the trunk, and it crashes down. The sound of splitting wood excites me, I admit. It’s different from the sound of snapping bones, but it reminds me of that kind of breaking. Then my father comes outside and looks at me. He has a glass of water in his hands.

“Thirsty?” he asks.

“Yeah, a little bit,” I say. He extends his arm to me, and I walk toward him. I take the glass. It’s cold, nice.

“Where are you going?” he asks like he might have before the Flash. Like he wants to tag along.

“Just riding around on the bike,” I say. His eyes narrow a little,

then he takes a deep breath and relaxes.

“Okay,” he says. He turns around, and Ike slides past him outside.

“You, too, Ike? You’re out of bed? You’re going outside?”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to some fresh air,” Ike says.

“That’s spectacular,” my father says. It’s been a long time since Ike has been outside. “You riding with Ama?” my father asks. He sounds so excited that it’s almost like he’s the father I had when I had a mother—that person I only sort of remember. The one who would hold me by my feet and tickle me until I couldn’t breathe. I remember that fun, breathless struggle. I also remember, always, that he didn’t treat my mother well. He used to yell and scream. I used to hide in my room with Ike, and to distract him, we’d play hide and seek. Back before Ike was a genius. Before I was a murderer. That I remember.

“See ya, Daddy,” I say, and give him a hug. I keep my eyes open all through it.

“Have fun, ginger root,” he says as he touches my hair. And I close my eyes for a half second to feel the simple good of his hands on my head. Then I’m on the bike, and Ike is sitting in front on the handlebars, and we're riding in the wind like we’re unstoppable beings who truly have all anyone could ever hope for.

Our street is Harper, and then we ride down Flint to get onto Conduit AB-14, which we stay on for a while. Conduit AB-14 is framed by trees full of drone birds and dirt. It’s four lanes of empty road. Naked road for miles and miles, and if it didn’t mean the end of the world, all that empty might be beautiful, maybe.

On the way we see a group of men and women beating down some other man. When I ride by, they stop to look at me. I smile and wave. When they see me, their eyes go wide, then the group of them run off in the opposite direction. “I’m not gonna hurt you,” I call out. They don’t believe me. They don’t stop running. The one who was getting beat on gets up. His face is mashed pretty good. “You’re still magnificent and supreme. Nothing can change that,” I tell him. He picks up a rock. Turns from me, unbuckles his pants, and shows me his butt cheeks. Then, when

his pants are back on, he goes running after the group.

"Meatheads," Ike says, trying to keep me from feeling bad.

"Yeah," I say.

It takes us almost an hour to get there. I stop two streets before Kennedy to catch my breath, and we walk the rest of the way. Carl's cluster looks pretty much like ours,

>"I think the furthering of variance might truly suggest the dissolving of consistency we've always expected," says Ike.

"Hope so," I say. And we walk more.

When we finally do get to Kennedy, the heads of two women, Patricia Samuel and Lesly Arcor, are stuck onto the street sign. Carl's set the two heads up to look like they're kissing. Patricia Samuel is Carl's mother.

"I guess Carl is still Carl," Ike says. Looking around, curious, kind of scared, almost like how I imagine a real little kid might look. There are no more real little kids. Even the babies know they're stuck. Most of them don't cry at all. Some of them never stop crying ever.

It always looks like World War VI over on Kennedy because of Carl. Two houses are on fire. There are dark spots that show where Carl's victims bled out on the streets. He's a real terror. Still. It's easy to judge him because, I mean, he does the absolute worst stuff to people. I once saw him use his body and various household objects to physically violate eight people, who were all tied up at once. He was fourteen when the Flash came, like me.

It's supereasy to think he is the Devil himself because of all the things he does and because sometimes he screams, "In this hell, the Devil, the Lord, and everything in between is named Carl," but I've been there. Being strong can make you like that. Carl is my protégé. He'll never admit it, but it's true. He's the protégé of Knife Queen Ama. The Ama who started with one knife and ended with three blades and two guns, who could kill all one hundred and sixteen people on my cluster in one hour and twenty-two minutes. I'd take a shower and change halfway through because my clothes got so heavy. Every inch of my black skin painted the maroon of life. The old Ama would murder everyone because, when everyone was gone, she got to feel like

she was the only one in the world and there was no one who might ever do her wrong again. Sometimes she'd just sit in the grass and feel supreme and infinite. She'd try to stare at a single blade of grass, or dance in the empty streets, or sing at the top of her lungs, until the Flash came. Sometimes she'd cry and cry as she washed the blood from her hair and eyes. Sometimes she wouldn't wash it off at all.

Imagine the worst thing anyone has ever done. I promise, I've done it to everyone. More than once.

When I realized I was faster and stronger, at first I didn't know what to do. I thought that maybe I was supposed to be on top now. I thought I was getting rewarded. And so I did what I wanted. Before the Flash, Carl was not nice to me. He liked to call me "nappy-headed bitch," or "dumb-ass cunt." He liked to make me cry back when we still had school. Then, when my mother left us, when I saw him, he said, "Guess your mother didn't want to be alive, knowing she made you." That, well, I know he regrets saying that. Because after the Flash, once I realized what I could do, I hunted him. He was the first person I ever killed. He was the first person I'd kill every day. The hurt I've pulled out of that boy could fill the universe twice over.

I'd rush over to his house and find different ways to ruin him. There is nothing—nothing—I haven't done to Carl Samuel. I know well-done Carl from medium-rare Carl. I made sure his mother knew the difference, too. Even made her choose a favorite. It was a good day for me when she admitted her preference.

"Tell me, Patricia, which do you prefer?" I laughed. She was tied to the posts on the side of the stairs. I grabbed her cheeks. Her son's blood was crusting beneath my fingernails. I pulled her face down to the two strips of meat I'd cooked just a few minutes before. I fried the boy's arm pieces in olive oil. I even added salt, pepper, and adobo. Carl was writhing and crying behind me. His arm severed and the wound cauterized. I didn't even have to tie him up.

"Hey, baby. You are supreme and—" Mrs. Samuel started, and then I snapped one of her fingers. She screamed. By then, I was immune to the sound of humans screaming. Or the thing I think

others felt when they heard someone hurt, I felt the exact opposite. It was music for me: the way people scream when they're just afraid versus when they know their life is going to end. The unrelenting throaty sobs a man makes when you dangle his life in front of him, the shouts a child makes as you remove their arm. The sharp harshness that comes from a mother who can't save her son and can't stop trying. But that day Patricia Samuel swallowed up her scream and stared past me to her son. "You are infinite; this is nothing. I love you, Carl. You are perfect. You are supreme. You are infinite. We are forever."

"Very sweet. Now tell me, Mrs. Samuel." I smiled and made my voice soft. "Do you prefer the well-done or the medium?" Patricia Samuel wept as I turned my back to her.

"Please, Queen Ama, I beg you, please spare him today."

"Knife Queen Ama," I corrected. "If you tell me which you prefer, I may find some mercy for you." I took the knife out of my fanny pack.

"Please, Knife Queen." She wept, just as desperate as a person can be.

I shook my head. "Carl, your mother did this to you," and then I pressed my knee on his neck. It's not that hard to remove someone's eye.

Carl's screams: yippy and small, and then they grow. They're wordy and pathetic. "Ah! Hey! Okay! Okay!" Like I was giving him a wedgie. Then they grow and pull and stretch. "Nooooo, noooooooo!"

"I love you, baby; it's okay," Mrs. Samuel said.

"Yeah, Carl, it's okay," I said, stabbing deeper, shucking the blade into the boy's skull. Laughing at how easy it was. Carl was silent. He wasn't dead. His body shook.

"Please, Knife Queen!" She screamed for her son.

"Which do you prefer?"

"Ama, please!"

"Medium or well-done?" So much misery in that room.

"Neither!"

“You have to pick,” I said, looking up at her, smiling with her boy and so much of his blood in my hands.

“I—”

“In a second there’ll be a very rare option on that plate,” I said.

“Baby, I promi—”

“You have to pick,” I repeated. It was like holding down a fresh-caught fish.

“Mom!” Carl screamed.

“Well-done,” she finally said.

I stopped. “Take another bite to make sure.” She followed my command immediately. Bending down, almost breaking her own arm to eat the meat with her mouth as her hands were tied to the posts behind her.

“Well-done, Knife Queen Ama.”

“Good to know,” I said. “That’s how you’ll have your Carl next cycle.”

Then I got up and left.

I forced Carl and Patricia to live similar nightmares hundreds of times. What’s surprising is how it never got easier for them. Carl was always terrified; his mother was always desperate, destroyed, and ready to be destroyed for him.

I hunted Carl for so long that even though I still hated him I got bored. I started hurting other people. At first I only bullied the bullies. The people who tried to hurt. And then I started hurting everybody. The way I felt about Carl sort of leached out. I was a real terror. People accumulate differently. When Carl’s body started accumulating like mine, when he got as strong as I was, as fast as me, as good with sharp things, then he became a real genuine terror, too.

There’s dark red streaked everywhere on Kennedy. It’s like walking into an old room you haven’t lived in for a long time.

“Maybe let’s get back on the bike,” I say.

“Wise,” Ike says, and then, as he’s climbing up onto the handlebars, there’s a bang. I look down and I don’t have a knee

anymore. It's just a shattered bloody thing. I eat back the screams I feel because I'm not the kind of person who screams anymore.

"Dammit!" Ike says. "We have to go."

"Sheesh," I say. "Okay, we're okay. We are—"

"Ama, I know, we have to go!" Then Carl's screams from above us.

"How dare you! *Sliht baree ki lopper TRENT*."

When I realized that Carl was also accumulating in his body, that he was becoming like me and maybe had been like me the whole time but wasn't smart enough to realize it, I let him be my friend. Here in the forever Loop anything can happen. You can make a friend of the Devil. You can pretend everything was a dream. Carl was my only friend for a while. We did what we wanted to other people. We hurt them together. We even invented our own language: Carama. There are a lot of bad words in Carama. It's a language for war gods, so it's pretty aggressive. We've sat on rooftops and watched without fear as entire communities joined together to try to bring us down. "*Sliht baree ki lopper trent*," he screams again. It means something like "Prepare for a violent death, you lowly creature."

"Just checking in," I say. "We're leaving."

"Ama!" Ike screams. I can see he's afraid, and he should be. But I haven't seen Carl in such a long time, and there's a chance that even he is different now.

"Checking out, actually," Carl says. And I hear him laugh at what he thinks is clever. He flips down from the roof of a house to the street. He's holding his piercer rifle. That's one thing. When he starts his day, Carl has some pretty serious stuff ready in his house. His father, before he died, was some kind of Aqua Nazi. Even before the Water Wars started, he was preparing against Black people, Middle Eastern people, Christians, and Jews because he thought they were going to steal from the water reservoirs or something. He was a pretty mean guy, I guess. Carl used to come to school black-eyed and bruised. Kids used to laugh at how crazy his pops was. He wasn't a happy boy. He's still not a happy boy. He wears a T-shirt on his head with the neck hole slanted to cover his left eye, and the shirt's arms are tied back in

a knot behind his head. He uses an elastic band he cuts from a pair of underwear like a headband over the shirt to keep it in place even better. It's the first thing he does every day. His eye, his eye. Some pain lasts through a hundred deaths.

The hot rain starts falling. Blue sky, Horn, hot rain, Flash. Those are the totems. Those are the things that come no matter what you say, think, pray, do, or die. The hot rain feels like a warm shower. Ike says the rain is a thermonuclear by-product of all the bombing that was going on during the time the Flash first hit. He says that even if the Flash didn't come the rain would give us all cancer. But I like it. Every day it comes and it's warm and it reminds you like, hey, wasn't that pretty good when you were dry earlier?

"*Kia Udon Rosher, ki twlever plumme sun,*" I scream, which means, like, "Oh great destroyer, you are supreme." The feeling in my mangled leg is disappearing, and the world starts flickering out.

Carl laughs. He wears a purple bathrobe that belonged to his father like the gun he raises.

"You're a stupid cunt," Carl says in plain old language. I feel my old self in my fingers as I reach for my pack. He skips toward me as my knee bleeds and bleeds. It hurts very badly. I've felt much worse, but it's so hard to remember anything other than what's now when you're hurt now.

After Carl and I broke our war-god pact and our friendship, we became sworn enemies. It happened because Carl didn't like how I acted like I was stronger than he was. Also, I think, because he was bored. One day he caught me off guard and knocked me out with a shovel. When I woke up, I was chained to a tree and I didn't have any fingers on my left hand. I was, like, "Sheesh." That was the beginning of a very, very long day. It had been lifetimes since anyone had been able to hurt me like that, and I realized how bad I had been, and for how long, and how I wasn't going to do anything like that ever again.

But now, with my knee exploded, I'm thinking about how I want to make Carl sip broth made from his own bones. I point the gun at my brother. Even after all this forever, it's something I do not like to do. Even if it's to save him from Carl, who will do

things so, so much worse. Even the old me didn't kill Ike. Which is probably why he had such a hard time for a while. It was lonely for him: a boy in a dead town and his sister the bringer of all pain.

"No you don't!" Carl says, and I try to pull the trigger. There's a bang and it's not from my hands and then the world disappears and I leave my brother in the hands of the worst person on the planet.

You are safe. You are protected. Continue contributing to the efforts by living happily.

I wake up. I grab Mom's knife and hold it in my hands.

Good torture feels like it will never end. You never forget it. I wonder what happened to Ike as I brush my teeth and shower and stuff my knife into my fanny pack. Carl is great at torture. Carl knows what he's doing because Carl learned from me, and I might be the best ever at that stuff. I imagine what Carl did to Ike, and I know he's been through the kind of pain that will never leave him.

I go to Mrs. Nagel's place. She's just so fragile and weak. Still. Always. Her breathing sounds like struggle, and even though she's sleeping, there are lines around her eyes like she's concentrating hard on something. I open my fanny pack and take out the knife. I put the blade against Mrs. Nagel's neck. The metal reflects a sliver of light against her skin as her throat grows and shrinks, carrying air in and out of her body badly. It'd be so easy even if she weren't so sick. She was the easiest out of everyone. She only woke up when the old me wanted her to. When I wanted her to know what was happening to her, which was a lot of the time. I take my knife back, tuck it into my pack, and go downstairs.

I squeeze lemon into elderflower tea. When I climb back up the stairs, Mrs. Nagel is awake, and she looks at me with eyes that are tired and warm. I put the hot mug on her nightstand.

"Ama," she says, and she scoots up in her bed. She tries to take a deep breath, but can't. She smiles and motions for the box of tissues that is always on the floor. Such a big difference it would make if it was just on her nightstand, if she could just have that one thing be easy and simple.

Instead, that little thing, it's magnified by a million, and it makes you just want to cut your own head off that she can't just have that one thing be right for once.

"Hey, Mrs. Nagel," I say.

"What's wrong?" she says. It chills me to hear her ask. Even though it's been a long time, not a lot of people say things like that to me. Most people are afraid of me. A lot of them hate me and they should.

I climb up on the bed behind Mrs. Nagel so she can lean back into me and I can massage her temples to help with the headaches. I say, "I feel like maybe I liked the old me better. The old Ama. It was easier. And maybe the new Ama isn't doing anything."

Mrs. Nagel blows her nose. "New Ama?"

"Yeah, you know. Me now," I say. "Like how I'm not killing everybody or torturing anyone or whatever."

"And that was the old Ama who did that?"

"Yeah."

"And what's the difference between the two?"

"The old me did everything one way. And only thought about one person. Now I try to help everybody instead of killing them."

"I see, but what changed?"

"I used to be afraid," I say. I watch her breathe and listen to see if her heart is beating faster, if she is afraid. She is not. "I know I can't take it back. I know I'm the worst person who ever lived. I know that. I'm not afraid anymore. I'm only scared of me."

"I see, and that means you've been two people?"

"I'm better now. And I'm sorry. But sometimes something in me—like right now, it'd be so easy." I continue to rub softly, but it's true. I can't stop imagining how easy it would be to crush Mrs. Nagel's neck. Like crumpling a piece of paper. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean that," I say. "I want everyone to feel happy and supreme and infinite. That's the new me."

"Hmm," Mrs. Nagel says.

“How can you not see the difference?” I say, trying to keep my voice down. “I’m so much better now. I am.”

“I think you’ve done a fine job. People come visit me so often since you changed. And it’s true that in the past you were a terrible witch.” “Exactly.” “But I think there’s only one Ama. And I think I’m talking to her.”

“I’m sorry. For all of it,” I say.

“You should be.” Mrs. Nagel points to the bathroom, which means she wants me to give her a towel with warm water for her head. I do it. Then we’re quiet for a long time. I sit with her through the Horn. Then she falls back asleep. I sit with her for a while more. When I jump back home, the sky is already gray and the hot rain is already falling. Also, a bike I know belongs to Carl is set down on the grass. All the bikes on Kennedy belong to Carl. I pull my knife out. I climb up and slide inside my bedroom window and creep downstairs. Carl is sitting at the table. My father is making pancakes, swaying at the stove. And Ike is at the table, too, with his legs crossed in his chair and his back to me.

“There she is,” my father says. I’m thinking I have the angle: I can leap across the kitchen table and get to Carl.

“Why is he here!” I say. “Ikenna, I’m sorry, I tried.”

“Don’t worry, I was fine,” Ike says. “You got to the gun? You got out?” I ask.

“No, I told Carl I had some info for Robert and he let me go see him.”

“*Udon Rosher Carl jilo plam,*” Carl says. It means “Carl, the great destroyer, spared the weakling.” He is in his robe with the shirt over his head. His one exposed eye stares at me and only me.

“Oh,” I say.

“Tt’s been so long. I asked Carl if he wants to watch the Flash with us. Remember when we used to do that. Remember, we would watch on the wall?” my father asks.

“Why are you here now?” I ask. I’ve gotten close enough that I know I have a good shot at him.

IT'm here to kill you and make your family watch," Carl says. I can see his hunting piercer is at his feet. My father turns and stares at Carl.

"Carl," my father says. "You used to be an okay kid. If I could, you know what I would do to you?"

"Yes, sir," Carl says.

"Okay," my father says. It's true. With me and Carl, it's better not to try to stop us when we want to do something. Everyone knows that by now. I smile because my father defended me and has been killing me less and less lately.

"What did Robert say?" I ask while I still can.

"Whatever happened with you," Ike says. "Whatever happened —you're the first it's happened to, so we'll see. Maybe it's a domino in an eventual collapse." We're all pretty quiet. "Nothing new, really. But we think we can say for sure that this isn't going to last forever. Unless it does."

"Okay," I say. And I leap. I lunge with my knife, and nobody else in the history of the world would even flinch, but Carl is Carl, so he grabs the table and flips it up like a shield. I use my elbow to blow through it pretty easily. The table is in pieces, and Ike runs back. My father stops cooking and swings a hot, pancakey pan at Carl. Carl ducks it, and as he does, I swing my knife at his neck. He dodges two good slashes, then kicks me hard in the ribs. I crash back into the dishwasher. Rib broken for sure. I get up and focus. I smile because I, Ama Grace Knife Queen Adusei, am a fighter, the greatest ever. Lately, I don't get to fight much. Or now I fight differently. But these fights, with fists and knives, I have more practice in. I jump forward again. Carl grabs my wrist and twists so I drop my knife.

"You are supreme and infinite, Carl, and I am very sorry for all that I have done," I say as I knee him in the ribs, and before even bringing my leg back down, I'm in a backflip and kicking into his chin. He stumbles back.

"BITCH!" Carl screams, and makes to grab the gun out of the rubble that's forming out of the kitchen. I kick him in the gut and throw him out toward the living room.

"Sorry, *Udon Rosher*," I say while charging. He punches me in

the mouth, and I see black, then the world comes back to me. “I meant no disrespect. I know you’re strong. I just want you to know I am sorry for the things I did to you.”

“Fuck you,” Carl says, and he’s coming at me with his flurry of heavy punches. He misses with a big right, and his fist goes through the wall. As he tries to pull his arm out, I get behind him and punch down on his neck in a way I know will make him crumble. Then I rip off the shirt on his head, and it’s like I hit the master switch. “*Hellio YUPRA! Ki Udon Rosher! TRENT!*” Carl screams as he holds his eye. Weeping on his knees. “*Okay! Okay! Hellio yupra.*” Even when I’m not touching him, he screams and claws at his own eye. He becomes a little bit of the old Carl. I hit him another time, hard at the base of his neck, to keep him from moving. His paralyzed body does nothing, and his face keeps doing so much.

“*Udon Rosher, ki love,* okay,” I say.

“End it!” Carl screams, keeping one eye open. Outside, the hot rain has stopped. I drag Carl upstairs and make sure he’s comfortable in my bed. He screams and screams in Carama, and I understand him very well. He spits and cries. I sit with him.

“I know you’re going to get through all this,” I say. When his voice is coarse and he can’t scream anymore, I leave him.

My father and brother are in Ike’s room. Ike is writing something. My father is coloring in a coloring book.

“Ama!” my father says.

“Ama,” Ike says.

“We’re good,” I say. My rib is broken, and I’m kinda bleeding out of my ear. “Still want to go watch?” I ask. These are my guys. I’m blessed knowing I can protect them.

Outside, the hot rain makes the air smell like burning rubber, but you can still smell the fresh wet earth underneath so it’s not all bad. Once we were all keeping things through the Flash, it became a tradition for everyone on our street to watch it together, to disappear all at once. Then we stopped doing that.

We press ourselves to the side of our house facing west. I’m dizzy and happy. Breathing hurts, but still I feel as infinite as

ever. Still supreme. We get on the wall. Our wall. I lean my back against it, and I feel the wet seep through. A long time ago, Ike explained to us how nuclear radiation, besides destroying stuff, bleached everything it didn't make disappear and that our bodies, if they were right up against something, would leave shadows that would last forever. For a long time we tried to use our bodies to send messages to the future. Hoping that after we were gone, if the Loop broke, the future would see us and know. I'd make little hearts with my hands, or sometimes we'd all hug each other to show them, like, love was a thing even for all of us who lived through the wars that ended everything. Now when we do it, it's mostly for fun.

"What are you going to do?" my father says.

"I think I'm going to do this," Ike says, looking up at us. He does a thing where he spreads his legs a little wider and acts like he's flexing both arms above his head. That's my brother. He's not too smart to be fun sometimes.

"Okay," my father says. "I'm going to do the animal man." He grabs a branch from the maple I snapped and puts it on his head so he'll look like he has feathers. The future will think he's an alien. Me, I've already picked one leg up and tucked it into my knee. It's pretty hard to breathe, but it's not that hard.

"Dancer," I say before he asks. That's kind of my signature. I've done different versions of it, but this one is the best I can do with a broken rib and a knocked-around head. I have one leg on the ground, and then I bring one arm and crane it above my head. We only have to wait a minute.

There's a faraway light. Then a roar like long, slow thunder. The roar doesn't stop; it gets louder, and then it's so loud you can't hear anything. The faraway light grows, and it's yellowish at first, and in the beginning, it looks like something that's meant to help you, like another sun. Then it grows taller than any building, greater than a mountain. You can see it's eating the world, and no matter what, it is coming for you. Rushing toward you. And by the time it's blinding, you are terrified and humbled. Watching it, you know it's the kind of thing you should only get to see once. Something that happens once and then never again. We've all seen it so many times, but I still cry, because, when it comes, I

know for sure we are infinite. All you feel is infinite, knowing all the falls and leaps and sweet and death that's ever been will be trumped by the wall of nuclear flying at you. You of all people. Then, before you're gone, you know that all that's ever been will still be, even if there are no tomorrows. Even the apocalypse isn't the end. That, you could only know when you're standing before a light so bright it obliterates you. And if you are alone, posed like a dancer, when it comes, you feel silly and scared. And if you are with your family, or anyone at all, when it comes, you feel silly and scared, but at least not alone.

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